

Associated Press

**Official says beetle-killed trees a future hazard**

By MATT JOYCE , 01.16.09, 11:22 AM EST



The pine beetle epidemic chewing through forests in Wyoming and Colorado could endanger roads, power lines and other infrastructure as millions of acres of trees fall to the ground, a top U.S. Forest Service official said.

Rocky Mountain Regional Forester Rick Cables told Wyoming lawmakers Thursday that the threat of falling trees demands that forest managers work to clear trees away from key pieces of infrastructure before it's too late. The fallen trees also provide fuel for forest fires and complicate access for firefighting, he said.

"If you can imagine almost 2 million acres of flat trees - it would be like a wind event or a hurricane came through and just laid the forest flat," Cables said. "And it only takes one tree to close a trail or a road."

Cables said there are more than 3 million acres of dead or dying forests in the two states, including nearly 2 million acres of dead lodgepole pine forest in southern Wyoming and northern Colorado. Lodgepole pines typically fall down seven to 15 years after they die, he said.

The bark beetle epidemic and its effect on regional forests dominated discussion at a briefing on forest health held by the Joint Agriculture, State and Public Lands, and Water Resources committees. Federal and state officials said bark beetles have become a leading factor in forest management since the epidemic was triggered by an extended drought in the late 1990s and early 2000s.






In Wyoming, the pine beetle infestation grew by more than 400,000 acres last year to a total of 1.2 million acres, according to the results of an aerial survey released Thursday by the Forest Service and Wyoming State Forestry Division.

"Right now (the epidemic) is so big there's really nothing you can do to stop it," said Bill Crapser, Wyoming state forester. "So really what we have to focus on now is public safety ... and what we want the future forest to look like and start to position ourselves to move to that."

**Comment On This Story**

Cables said he has requested more than \$200 million in [emergency funding](#) from the Forest Service for the next three years to address the problem. As part of the project, the Medicine Bow National Forest in southeastern Wyoming is working on an environmental analysis of plans to protect infrastructure from falling trees, he said.

**Article Controls**

-  EMAIL
-  REPRINT
-  NEWSLETTER
-  COMMENTS
-  SHARE
- [YAHOO! BUZZ](#)

**Related Stories**

- [Why The Government Should Get Out Of Banking](#)
- [What Bill Gross Is Buying](#)
- [The Crisis and the Policy Response](#)
- [Smart Seeds, Smart Crops](#)
- [Ten Ways Obama Can Help Business Now](#)

**Related Videos**

[Tech Slaps Global Markets](#)  
[Google Beats, Profit Slips](#)  
[Watch GE, Google](#)  
[Super Bowl Advantage](#)  
[Microsoft's Surprise](#)

"It's going to be cheaper now than it will be later, because once the trees fall over it's going to be horribly expensive to try to get in and do this work," he said.

Forest managers said Thursday that they see logging and forest fires as key tools for managing Wyoming's existing forests and helping grow healthier forests when new trees sprout in areas devastated by beetles.

Crapser said a viable sawmill industry is critical because the mills create a market for the trees removed from forests, including those killed by beetles. The Wyoming sawmill industry has been struggling in recent years. Mills have closed in Cody and Sheridan, although Intermountain Resources plans to reopen a mill in Saratoga this year.

Nancy Fishing, of Intermountain Resources, said beetle-killed lodgepole pines are most valuable for wood products if they're harvested from three to five years after the tree dies, but can remain useful for up to 10 years.

Rep. Seth Carson, D-Laramie, questioned the severity of the wildfire risk posed by the increasing acreage of dead trees, which he referred to as the "gas can."

"I'm scared it's going to be the most hellacious fire we've ever seen," Carson said. "It just seems like there'd be no way to control it, just because of the scale."

Forest managers agreed that the prospect of a wildfire in beetle-ravaged forest is frightening. They said they've been working to try to reduce fuels in the forests, create fuel breaks within forests, clear defensible space around structures and increase firefighter training.

Cables said dead trees are particularly hazardous for fire when the needles are red. The risk decreases when the needles fall off because the needles aren't in place to carry a wind-driven fire, he said. But the hazard could be greatest once the trees fall down.

"That is the time, in my mind, that's going to be the very most difficult, because we are going to have real serious questions about putting crews in the middle of some of that country because they won't be able to get out," Cables said.

*Copyright 2008 Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed*

---

[Join the Business Visionaries Community on Forbes.com](#)

[Vexing Times At Varian](#)

[Citi, BofA Come Clean](#) ▶

[Bank Rescues Soothe The Street](#)

**Forbes VIDEO NETWORK**